

“Doubt and Deliverance”

Luke 7:18-23

Before I begin, I want to make something clear: We don't know what was in the heart of John the Baptist when he asked the question found in this text. The Bible does not explicitly tell us. The question suggests doubt and the answer Jesus gives calls for faith. Some have suggested that John asked this question, not for his sake, but for the sake of his disciples: that they would believe on Jesus as the Messiah. Others have suggested that this question comes from deep doubt and even despair in the heart of John. It is not my intention this morning to speculate about what was or was not in the heart of John the Baptist when he asked this question. Rather, I want to focus on a biblical response to doubt in our own hearts and lives as we apply what is clearly taught in this text.

In this passage we are told of a question John the Baptist asked Jesus, “Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?” And this question might surprise us. Didn't John say of Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29). Didn't John baptize Jesus, and on that occasion the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus and the Father proclaimed, “Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Hadn't John the Baptist heard of the preaching and teaching and miracle-working ministry of Jesus. How could John the Baptist doubt that Jesus was the Messiah?

And yet, in this question, John the Baptist appears to express doubt: “Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?”

It is very important that we carefully consider this question from John the Baptist because all of us struggle with doubt. I may have doubt about the gospel. Is Jesus the Way, the Truth, and the Life? Is Jesus the Messiah, or should I look for someone else? I may doubt God’s love and care for me. If I am suffering how do I know God cares? When things are hard, where is the love of God for me? I may doubt my forgiveness, my justification. I may doubt the power of the gospel for Christian living. I may be so full and overcome with doubt that I despair of life itself.

If any one of those doubts or all of those doubts are true of you this morning I want to encourage you with this: You are not alone. The temptation to doubt is part of the Christian’s warfare. In our text this morning we see doubt. But we also see deliverance. Do not despair Christian, whatever doubt you may be struggling with, there is a way of deliverance. And we will see that from our text this morning. In the promises of Jesus, we have deliverance from every doubt.

I. The Question (v. 18-20)

In verse 18 we read, “And the disciples of John shewed him of all these things.” Just as Jesus had disciples, or followers, so did John the Baptist. This was the system of higher-education in Israel at the time. If you wanted to devout

yourself to religious study, you would find a rabbi, a teacher, and you would follow him around. You would become one of his disciples. And the disciples of John the Baptist brought news of these things to him.

What things? What were John's disciples telling him? They were telling him about the ministry of Jesus. The sermons Jesus preached as Luke recorded in chapter 6. The miracles Jesus performed like those seen in chapter 7: the incredible healing of the centurion's servant and the raising of the widow's son from the dead. People all throughout Judea and the surrounding areas were talking about Jesus, and it was no different with the disciples of John the Baptist. They told John the Baptist about these things.

If this verse was all we had, what might we assume John's response would be to this news? Rejoicing? Praising God for sending the Messiah? Wonder and awe that God had used him as the humble forerunner of the Messiah? Maybe. But we don't need to speculate. We know how John responded to this news about Jesus.

We read John's question first in verse 19: "And John calling unto him two of his disciples sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?" And then verse 20 tells us that these men went to Jesus and repeated this question: "Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?"

Why did John ask this question? I want to remind you of some things that you probably know about John the Baptist but that you may have never considered

in connection with this question. First, John the Baptist faced great personal trials and suffering. John was in prison when he asked this question. In Luke 3:19 we are told that John boldly rebuked Herod for his unlawful marriage to Herodias who was Herod's niece and also the wife of Herod's brother Philip. There was much wrong with this situation and John reproved Herod for this marriage. And we are also told that he reproved Herod for other evil deeds he had done. This was a good thing. John the Baptist stood for righteousness and he was unafraid to call people to repentance, even if those people had political power to persecute him. And that's exactly what happened.

Luke 3:20 tells us that Herod put John in prison. Prisons are terrible places today. They were even worse in the first century.

We know that John was never set free. He sat in Herod's prison until he was beheaded at the request of Herodias' daughter. Of course, John didn't know that would happen to him. He didn't know what the future held for him. All he knew was that he had been faithful to stand for righteousness and now he was suffering.

How was that fair? Isn't God pleased with righteousness? Wasn't John the Baptist a prophet ordained by God? He had done good and now he was suffering for it.

I will not presume to speak on John's behalf, but I will speak for myself. I know from personal experience (and I'm sure you know this as well) that when suffering comes into our lives we are tempted to doubt God. Why did the cancer

come back? Why can't I have a child? Why did I lose my job? Why did my loved-one die? And on and on we could go with examples. We understand from Scripture that we live in a sin-cursed world where suffering happens all the time, but when it is on our plate, when we are suffering, one of the first and greatest temptations we will face is doubt. We will be tempted to doubt God. To doubt His goodness. To doubt His care for us.

This temptation can be magnified when, like John the Baptist, we suffer for righteousness sake. When we do good and we suffer for it, that can be hard. Doesn't God command us to do good? to stand for righteousness? Where is God's care for us? When we suffer, we are tempted to doubt, and John the Baptist was suffering.

Second, John the Baptist had preached a message of judgment. What did John the Baptist say about Jesus and His ministry? Listen to these quotes from John's preaching.

In Luke 3:7 he said, "Flee from the wrath to come."

In Luke 3:9 he said, "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire."

In Luke 3:16-17 he said, "I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he

will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.”

We see a theme. Judgment is coming. Repent. The Messiah who will judge the earth is coming. And this is what his ministry will be like: wrath, fire, purging.

John also called Jesus the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). I’m not suggesting that John only preached fiery judgment, but that was certainly a strong theme in John’s message.

Now put yourself in the sandals of John the Baptist. Here is the prophetic message you were given by God and that you faithfully delivered: A message that had a strong theme of wrath and judgment. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit you pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, the one you had preached about, the one from whom you had prepared the way. Now you are in prison and you are hearing about the ministry of the Messiah. And what do you hear? Do you hear of fiery judgment? Do you hear how Jesus is purging first Israel, and then the world?

No. You hear of a meek and lowly servant. He is performing miracles of mercy. He is preaching to great crowds, but when the people try to make Him their political leader, he will not let them. You look for the Lion of Judah, but you see a Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. (Revelation 5:5). The ministry of Jesus may not have been what John expected, and this may have tempted him to doubt.

Again, I won't presume to speak for John the Baptist, but I can speak for us. When God doesn't do what we want Him to do, or what we expect Him to do, or what we think we have Biblical warrant to believe He will do: When God doesn't do what we expect, one of the greatest temptations we face is doubt. "Why didn't God do this? And what does it mean about other expectations I have of Him?" When God doesn't meet our expectations, we are tempted to doubt. That may have been the case for John the Baptist.

Finally, John the Baptist was a man of his time. If you read the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, without the New Testament, it is hard to imagine the ministry of the Messiah separated from politics.

In Genesis 49:10 we read, "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be."

In I Chronicles 17 God promised David that he would establish his throne in Israel forever.

Referring to the Messiah, Isaiah 9:7 says, "Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this." From these prophecies (and many more like them) there was an expectation that God would restore

David's throne with an anointed king who would rule and reign over the Jewish people.

I'm not suggesting that John the Baptist was only interested in a political Messiah. In fact, from his preaching we know that wasn't the case. He warned the people of sin and judgment and called them to repentance. But John was a man of his time in this way: All John knew was the revelation God personally gave him and what was given in the Old Testament prophecies.

Remember what Peter said in I Peter 1:10-11. He was writing about revelation of the way of salvation. And he makes this comment, "Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow."

Even the Old Testament prophets who prophesied of the Messiah didn't fully understand God's plan of redemption. They enquired, they searched diligently, they prophesied faithfully, they looked forward in faith for the deliverance God promised, but they did not live in the fulfillment of these things. All they had was the revelation God had given them.

We live in the fulfillment of Christ's saving, redeeming work and what a blessing that is. That's a blessing John the Baptist did not have. And because of the time in which John lived, he lived and ministered before Jesus completed his work

of redemption, he may have been tempted to doubt when he heard of Jesus' apolitical ministry— a ministry that was divorced from the politics of that time.

Again, I will not presume to speak on behalf of John the Baptist, but I can speak for us. We must be careful to not allow the time and culture in which we live to determine our view of God and Scripture. Like John the Baptist, we are people of our time. We live when we live and we cannot change that. But we must remember that the work of God transcends our time in history and the culture in which we live. If we put the expectations of our time and culture upon the ministry of Jesus Christ, upon the gospel, we will end up distorting the gospel in some way and we will be tempted to doubt. That may have been the case with John the Baptist.

John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to Jesus with this question: “Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?” We are not told why John asked this question. Maybe he was struggling with his circumstances: the suffering he faced. Maybe he was struggling because of the expectations he had for Jesus. Maybe he was struggling to understand the ministry of Jesus. These are certainly all areas where we can struggle and where we can be tempted to doubt.

And the disciples of John the Baptist did come and ask Jesus this question: “Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?” Now let's consider what Jesus was doing when he was asked this question. In verse 21 we see the power Jesus demonstrated.

II. The Power (v. 21)

It appears that Jesus did not immediately answer this question. This question was brought to Jesus but he did not immediately give an answer. Or at the very least Jesus answered this question in the context of the work he was doing. And what was Jesus doing?

He was working miracles of healing and deliverance: “And in that same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight.” Jesus was doing these miracles when this question was brought to Him. The disciples of John witnessed these miracles.

As always, these miracles testified of the nature and power of Jesus Christ. The miracles Jesus performed showed that his power came from God. They were a testimony to the power and approval of God on His ministry. They were an overwhelming evidence that left the men who witnessed them without excuse for their unbelief.

This is what Peter preached in Acts 2:22, “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know.”

Yet we know that many did not believe. Many who witnessed the miracles of Jesus did not believe. And from a distance, both in time and space, we read about

these miracles and about the unbelief of many who witnessed them and we think, “Well, there must have still been room for doubt. Maybe there was some sort of natural explanation for the miracles Jesus performed.”

No. The unbelief wasn't there because there was room for doubt. The unbelief was there because men are hardened in their sin. Even when faced with overwhelming physical evidence right before their eyes, men are so blinded and so hardened in their sin that they will not believe.

We learn something here about the nature of man. Does man have a free will? Yes. We make choices and we are responsible before God for the choices that we make. These choices are not forced. We are free to do as we choose. Any person who has ever made a choice, who has ever exercised their will in any way, did what they wanted to do. This is the nature of the human will. We follow our strongest inclination in every situation.

And what does the Bible say is the ruling power in the heart of man? Sin. Jeremiah 17:9, Ephesians 2:1, Colossians 2:13, Romans 5:12-17, Romans 6:6-14, and on and on we could go listing Scriptures that show man's heart is ruled by sin. Sin manifests itself in different ways. It appears to different degrees in different people and in different places. It can even superficially appear to be righteousness as Jesus talked about in His sermon in Luke 6. But when you strip it down and you get to the core, what you find in the heart of every man is the ruling and totally corrupting power of sin. Even with God incarnate, Jesus Christ working miracles

before their very eyes, man still did what he is most inclined to do. He chose sin. And he rejected righteousness.

It takes the grace of God to change the inclination of our hearts from sin to righteousness. This is that miraculous, life-giving power Paul was talking about in Ephesians 1:19-20: “What is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places.”

The same power that raised Christ from the dead worked our salvation. Turned us from being hardened in our sin to being open and receptive to the gospel. That’s a work only God can do, and we thank Him for it.

Those who saw the miracles and ministry of Jesus and responded in faith did so by God’s grace.

Those who saw the miracles and ministry of Jesus and did not believe did so because men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. This is what Jesus said in John 3:19.

The miracles Jesus performed were proof of His nature and His power. When you and I are struggling with doubt, we must go back to the work of God.

But you say, “We can’t go and see the miracles of Jesus.”

Neither could John the Baptist. He was locked up in prison. He had to rely on the testimony of his disciples.

We have a more sure word of testimony, the Word of God, as Peter says in II Peter 1:19. And we have another privilege that John the Baptist didn't have: we know the completed work of Jesus Christ as redeemer. When you are tempted to doubt or when deep in the mire of doubt itself, go back to the cross of Jesus Christ and remember the work God completed on your behalf there. The work of Jesus Christ is our first bulwark against doubt. Rest in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Are you tempted to doubt because of your current circumstances? Look again to the cross of Jesus Christ. There the question of God's love for you was eternally settled. Does God love you? Does God care? Don't look to your present circumstances for the answer. Look to the only begotten Son of God, pierced for you. God's love for you was settled at Calvary.

Are you tempted to doubt because God is not doing what you want Him to do? or what you expected Him to do? Look to the cross of Jesus Christ and be reminded that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. Don't set your expectations on what you want God to do for you, but rest in what God has done for you.

Are you tempted to doubt because you are judging the work of God through the lens of your time and culture? I Corinthians 1:21 says, "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." And in verse 25, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than

men.” The wisdom of the world is no standard by which to judge God. Look to the work of Jesus Christ accomplished at Calvary and rest in the wisdom and power of God demonstrated in the work of redemption.

John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus with this question: “Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?”

When they came to Jesus, they found him performing miracles: “He cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and of evil spirits; and unto many that were blind he gave sight.” In one sense, these miracles were enough. But in our text Jesus also answered the question.

III. The Answer (v. 22-23)

Jesus tells them to go back and tell John what they had seen and heard. They had seen the miracles Jesus performed. They had heard Jesus preach. And now Jesus tells them to go back and tell John about these things. And notice this list that Jesus gives: “The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached.”

This list corresponds with prophecies from Isaiah. Isaiah 35:5-6 says, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.”

Isaiah 61:1 says, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.”

Jesus didn't tell John's disciples: “Believe me because I said so. Tell John to believe me because I said so.” Rather, Jesus performed miracles which demonstrated His nature and His power in fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies. And then he sent John's disciples back to tell John what they had seen and heard and how it aligned with God's Word.

Rest in the promises of God's Word. He will keep his Word. He will do what he has promised. No force in creation can stop the hand of the Creator.

I want to point something out about one of the prophecies Jesus referenced in this text. Isaiah 61 is the same passage Jesus read from when he was in the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4. This is the section Jesus read on that occasion: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” He read that far, then he closed the book and sat down.

The very next phrase, found in Isaiah 61:2 in our Bibles, says, “And the day of vengeance of our God.” The first time Jesus came, he came as a suffering

servant. When He returns, he will come to rule and reign with an iron rod and every knee will bow before Him and every tongue will confess Him to be Lord. (Revelation 19:15 and Philippians 2:10-11). Jesus is both Savior and Sovereign, Comforter and King, our Brother, our Friend, our Lord and our God.

We mentioned earlier that John the Baptist, in his office as a prophet, had warned the people of the judgment of God in connection to the ministry of the Messiah and that Jesus' meek ministry may have been part of the reason for the question John asked: "Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?" Jesus was in the middle of his ministry as Savior, and he points John and his disciples back to the Old Testament Scriptures to show them that His ministry was perfectly consistent with what had been prophesied and there was more yet to be fulfilled.

This is a good reminder to us. Our view is limited. We don't always understand why or how God is working in any given situation. But we can rest assured that He will perfectly accomplish all He promised.

After alluding to these Old Testament prophecies, Jesus gave one more message to the disciples of John the Baptist to carry to their master: "And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me."

These are the last words Jesus would ever say to John. Jesus demonstrated his power, but he made no promise to use His power to relieve John's suffering. Jesus gave John no further explanation of His ministry as Redeemer.

Imagine this conversation. The disciples of John the Baptist return to their master and they say, “We went to Jesus. We saw the mighty miracles he works. We heard the gospel he preaches to the poor. And he showed us the prophecies he is fulfilling.” Then John asks, “But what did He say to me?”

What did Jesus say to John? “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.” Jesus encouraged the faith of John the Baptist, but he left his prison doors closed.

What happened to John the Baptist? Did he fall away? Like so many in the multitude that followed Jesus from time to time, when the going got tough did John turn back?

No. He died as a faithful martyr.

Jesus never said anything negative about John. In fact, as we will see next week as we continue in Luke 7, Jesus spoke very highly of John the Baptist. And the last thing Jesus ever said to John the Baptist was this: “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.”

There is much that offends the natural man in the Gospel, in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Isaiah 8:14 refers to the Messiah as “A stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence.” and that passage is quoted twice in the New Testament in reference to Jesus (Romans 9:33 and I Peter 2:8).

I Corinthians 2:14 says, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him.”

In Jesus' day he was despised for his manner of birth (John 8:19), for his perceived place of birth (John 7:52), for his methods of ministry, for his association with sinners, for the doctrines that he preached, and for the ministry of redemption which He came to accomplish.

Jesus was, and still is, despised. A pastor from years ago wrote, “What drives [men] to revolt from Christ? It is because he appears with his cross, disfigured and despised, and exposed to the reproaches of the world; because he calls us to share in his afflictions; because his glory and majesty, being spiritual, are despised by the world; and in a word, because his doctrine is totally at variance with our senses.”¹

We should not be surprised when offenses come, when difficulties come, when we are tempted to doubt. This is part of the Christian’s warfare. And as these words of Jesus first given to encourage John, now encourage us, “Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.”

When doubt comes there is only one place we can go for deliverance. We must go to Jesus Christ. Go back to the works of Jesus. Go back to the words of Jesus. Go back to the promises of Jesus. Only in the person and work of Jesus Christ can we find deliverance.

I want to close by reading a selection from one of the most Biblically-grounded and helpful Christian books ever written: *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In that allegory, as Christian and his fellow-pilgrim Hopeful walked along the narrow way

¹ John Calvin’s commentary on Matthew 11:6.

they came to a difficult section of the road. And so they left the narrow way for what looked like an easier path. But they were captured by the Giant Despair who beat them severely and then locked them up in Doubting Castle.

As the days passed Christian and Hopeful began to despair. And that's where this selection is taken from: "On Saturday, about midnight, they began to pray, and continued in prayer till almost break of day.

Now, a little before it was day, good Christian, as one half-amazed, brake out in this passionate speech: What a fool, quoth he, am I, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key in my bosom, called Promise, that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle.

Then said Hopeful, That is good news, good brother; pluck it out of thy bosom, and try.

Then Christian pulled it out of his bosom, and began to try at the dungeon door, whose bolt (as he turned the key) gave back, and the door flew open with ease, and Christian and Hopeful both came out. Then he went to the outward door that leads into the castle-yard, and, with his key, opened that door also. After, he went to the iron gate, for that must be opened too; but that lock went hard, yet the key did open it. Then they thrust open the gate to make their escape with speed."

I titled this sermon "Doubt and Deliverance." Doubt is part of the Christian warfare. You may have struggled with it this week. You may be struggling with it

now. What key can set you free from doubting castle? The promises given to you by Jesus Christ. Rest in the finished work and promises of Jesus Christ.